

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 26

NEW YORK TIMES

10 MARCH 1977

Transcript of the President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Matters

EXCERPTS:

7. Classified Information

Q. Mr. President, last week in an interview you expressed concern about the disclosure of confidential and classified information. Admiral Turner, your choice to head the C.I.A., has said, I believe in testimony, that he would favor criminal penalties for that, for disclosure by Government officials of that type of information. But Vice President Mondale said he's opposed to it. I wonder, sir, if you'd tell us where you stand on that issue, do about this problem.

A. Well, my own interest would be to minimize the use of any criminal penalties for disclosure of information. There are other penalties that can be used without criminal charges. And I think that Vice President Mondale drew that distinction.

I don't know yet what procedure we will follow. My own hope would be that we could prevent the disclosure of intelligence or information that might be damaging to our national security rather than trying to control that problem by the imposition of legal criminal penalties.

Q. Could you elaborate on how you might prevent that, Mr. President?

A. Well I think, first of all, is a tighter control over the number of people who have access to material that's highly sensitive, that might damage a relationship between our own country and our friends and allies. And we've already initiated steps to that degree. And we'll be pursuing it.

As you know, Admiral Turner's only recently been confirmed. He's just now getting his presence felt in the defense communities. I'll be going out to the C.I.A. headquarters this afternoon to administer—to see the oath of office administered to him.

But we'll make sure that the public knows what new policies we impose. But the one that's easiest to describe and also very difficult to do, is to make sure that we don't have too many people knowing about matters that they don't need to know. And also that we can protect the legitimate confidentiality of agreements between ourselves and our allies.

Now I would never permit anything that was either illegal or improper. And we've got a very good arrangement that was primarily set up by President Ford, to prevent abuses. The Intelligence Oversight Board is made up of three distinguished men, appointed by President Ford, who have complete access to any operation conducted by the intelligence forces.

Senator Inouye's committee in the Senate and, I think, six committees in the House also have access to this information. And of course, I'm monitoring it myself. And I think Admiral Turner's integrity is also a guarantee that there will be no future abuses.

But that doesn't mean that everything that we do in gathering intelligence—on which our security might very well depend—has to be revealed to the public. And drawing of that distinction is one that's my responsibility. And I think I can handle it.

9. Inquiry on Helms

Q. Mr. President, it is widely reported that a grand jury in Washington may be investigating Richard Helms, the former C.I.A. director, to see whether to move forward on a case. And it is reported that perhaps the jury will want to see certain C.I.A. documents, and I presume you would be the final arbiter. Have you been asked for those documents, and what will be your policy if you are asked for them in this case or any other case?

A. I have not been asked for any documents, and the Helms case has not come to my attention, either officially or even indirectly, from any of the people involved.

Whether or not to proceed with the case will be the exclusive right of the Justice Department. The revelation of any documents that affect our national security will be my own judgment in this or other cases. And I can't respond any further than that, because that's all I know about the subject.

Q. If I may, sir. A. Yes, sir. Q. The problem, as you know, relates to, I guess, national security considerations on one hand and the legal system and justice on the other. Given the recent history, I just wonder how closely you will weigh those two?

A. Well, the prosecution of the case has nothing to do with me. That will be a judgment made by the Justice Department. The actual revelation to a grand jury or, in case of a trial if it should ever evolve, of confidential or of secret material would have to be judged by me.

Q. That would control, sir, would it not, whether the prosecution could go forward even if it chose? A. It may or may not. At that point, the responsibility for making a judgment and the responsibility for the consequences of an inaccurate judgment, if it should occur, would be my own.

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